



Synthesis

How Powerful is the Garden?

Hubert Gulinck, Hans Leinfelder, Valerie Dewaelheyns & Kirsten Bomans

This book promotes the theme of modest domestic gardens. It started with the general observation of the 'garden gap' in research and regional policies. Why is there so little known about the apparently trivial environments we call domestic gardens? The authors have highlighted many of the hitherto underrated characteristics and opportunities of the garden complex.

The genesis of the domestic Flemish garden was closely related to the evolution of housing policies. Throughout history, gardens have been multifunctional units. The dominance of food production has given way to a mix of functions determined by the modern lifestyle. The garden complex, defined as the sum of all domestic gardens, elevates the theme from triviality to a higher level of scale and significance. The garden complex can be viewed as one large regional system, which should no longer be ignored in spatial, land use and

environmental policies. It is certainly not a marginal theme compared to other, apparently more important themes of land use such as agriculture, forestry or nature conservation. Several authors in this book have illustrated that gardens contribute to the overall quality of green space. The majority of the chapters in this book each focus on one aspect of the garden complex. And yet they still do not cover the full range of garden-related topics. Economic relevance, aesthetics, social networking, these are just a few examples of aspects that still merit further study.

The garden theme is highly relevant in Flanders but also elsewhere: home gardens are part of many rural cultures, but they are also an integral part of the process of urbanization of the open space and countryside in many parts of the world. So gardens are elements that are both urban and rural in nature. The history of domestic and allotment gardens clearly

illustrates how gardens can be a fascinating physical expression of the transition from a rural to an urban and industrial society. In regions with a strong semi-rural or semi-urban character, domestic gardens deserve to be the object of further investigation. In an intimate association with other phenomena such as public green spaces, urban agriculture and recreational farming, domestic gardens make up an impressive land use category.

The garden complex should be on the agenda in spatial, environmental, agricultural, urban and conservation policies. And urban, residential and industrial development should not view gardens or the garden complex as a leftover category or as a cosmetic annex. For a more integrative planning approach toward gardens and the 'hard' side of development, including the garden theme in discussions on the optimal densities of residential development is an area of significant potential. The garden complex is a fascinating interface between land use categories (rural versus urban, food production, recreation etc.). The complex of domestic gardens can be seen as a major buffer in many ways. From a historical perspective, especially in Belgium, gardens have been perceived as cushions against food crises and social unrest. Gardens are functional and visual transitions between the 'hard urban areas' and the 'soft (semi-) natural areas'. So future strategic land use plans, certainly in very fragmented regions facing land scarcity like Flanders, will have to acknowledge not only the various 'pure' land use categories, but increasingly their functional and spatial interfaces as well.

The potential to provide ecosystem services like rainwater infiltration or the cooling effects of green areas in cities that is afforded within the garden complex is probably high, but unknown. The garden complex should be taken seriously in research and in the search for strategies to cope with the various challenges of our society, now and in the future. Gardens can play a strategic role in, for instance, new ways to ensure food security or in the adaptation of our daily living environment to climate change.

In order to meet these objectives, different disciplines need to be in a certain sense 're-engineered'. For instance the traditional surveys on biodiversity tend to operate in more natural or rural areas, and clearly show a lack of attention to the garden complex. To be sure, ecologists and biologists have demonstrated an increased attention in urban contexts, but again, the garden complex encompasses both urban and rural areas, and deserves much more attention from this perspective. If environmental policies could become more aware of the need to include gardens in their environmental monitoring systems, this would certainly trigger innovative research on issues such as water fluxes and stocks, and the flows and metabolism of substances such as soil carbon, phosphate and pesticides.

However research about, and monitoring of gardens faces some obstacles. The private nature of domestic gardens may hinder the establishment of scientifically sound survey and monitoring programmes. Within new strategies including domestic gardens, households

are important keyholders and participants. The (re-)positioning of gardens in land cover classification schemes and in habitat monitoring procedures requires innovative content and quality indicators. These are important steps towards the inclusion of gardens in other land use and environmental survey, census and monitoring programs. Many other research fields such as sociology, health science and recreation have yet to discover the garden complex as a more or less blanket theme of investigation. Strategic planners should (re-) consider the garden complex as a land-use theme in its own right.

The garden theme is here to stay. The 19th-century Belgian strategists had a point: through gardens, households are active participants in the strategies concerning national food security, and social peace and welfare in general. The global phenomenon of rural emigration to cities, although not dealt with in this book, should certainly be investigated as a real or potential 'garden theme' right in between the classical urban and rural approaches. Taking off the old paternalistic principles, and emphasizing many more strategic concerns including environment, climate and well-being, the garden complex can attain a new mature position in strategies for enhanced sustainability. How powerful can the garden be? Very powerful we believe, but more work is needed. We hope this book will provide a large dose of inspiration.

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Kirsten Bomans
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The **Powerful** Garden

Emerging views on
the garden complex

Garant

Policy Research Centre on Space & Housing



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Valerie Dewaelheyns, Kirsten Bomans
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